

CRICKLEY HILL AND GLOUCESTERSHIRE PREHISTORY

Philip Dixon and Patricia Borne

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FOREWORD

by

Professor Emeritus Stuart Piggott, C.B.E., B.Litt., D.Litt.Hum., F.B.A., F.S.A.

The nine seasons of excavation on the prehistoric sites of Crickley Hill have proved to be one of the most spectacularly successful pieces of recent archaeological field research in Britain, with results of importance not only to our own prehistory but that of the European continent. The earliest settlement on the hill, that of stone-using agriculturalists before 4,000 BC, has been shown to have been in its final phase a defended stronghold, walled and ditched, and attacked by raiders with bows and arrows, a fact of some importance in any estimate of social structure at this time. Defence and attack in later iron-using prehistory and in a context one can safely call Celtic is expressed by new fortifications with massive walls, rock-cut ditches, and complex gateway defences from soon after 700 BC, continuing over a couple of centuries of destructions, modifications, temporary desertion and re-settlement, with an early village of long rectangular timber houses, the first of their kind to be firmly set in such a context in Britain. This was to be replaced by another, with circular houses following the wide-spread tradition of the time.

All this is new, primary archaeological evidence, the basis of any estimate of the content and nature of British societies either in the fifth millennium or in the seventh and sixth centuries BC, and as such has important repercussions on our understanding of their continental counterparts. Its recovery has involved a notably well-organised excavation campaign over many years, but those responsible would be the first to maintain that, even with nearly three acres of Crickley Hill excavated to bedrock, this is a beginning, not an end; a heartening incentive to still further investigation of an uniquely important site which has so strikingly demonstrated its potential. For past achievement, all concerned deserve our admiration, praise and gratitude: let us hope that with public support and encouragement they may be able to maintain and develop this piece of fundamental research in the future.

THE NEOLITHIC PERIOD AT CRICKLEY HILL

The first farming communities in Britain, which used no metals, are dated by radiocarbon to the years before 4000 B.C. Their earliest settlements may well have been no more than a scatter of isolated farmsteads, but during the course of the next two millennia complex societies developed, trading in flint, and hard rocks from Wales and Cumbria, the raw materials for their tools. In southern England, they manufactured and exported pottery over considerable distances. Remarkably little is known of their dwelling places, a mere handful of sites throughout the country. More obvious are their numerous earthen or stone-built burial mounds, the largest several hundred feet in length containing dozens of bodies. These clearly had a religious use, and some ritual function may have been served by another type of monument left by these early Neolithic peoples, 'causewayed camps', enclosures marked out by rings of ditches and banks, whose continuity is interrupted by causeways.

The first major occupation at Crickley was a causewayed enclosure of this sort. Two lines of interrupted ditches cut off the low knoll in the centre of the promontory (see fig. 5). Behind each line ran a bank, built of the stone taken from the ditch, through which at least two entrances had been built. The inner ditches had been filled in, and were then partially recut and backfilled several times, a process which implies a lengthy but perhaps intermittent use of the site. Other activities were doubtless practised within the enclosure, and Neolithic pits and post-sockets have been uncovered here, but their pattern has been too obscured by later prehistoric occupation to reveal the site's first function.

After the final filling-in of the old ditches a new and larger ditch was dug parallel to the inner causewayed line. The old ditch was still visible, but was avoided, and a new bank was piled above it, faced with drystone walls and surmounted by a fence. At least two entrances were in use. Only the base of these structures survived, and the reconstruction on the following page (fig. 1) is tentative.

Whatever its precise form, the new work was defensive and presumably enclosed a settlement. Flint arrowheads lying in the entrance passageway and against the burnt palisade imply a sudden end to the Neolithic occupation.

Other Sites to see

The fortified enclosure at Crickley is so far paralleled in England only by the recently excavated defended site at Carn Brea, near Redruth, Cornwall. Causewayed enclosures are more numerous, and examples may be seen at Windmill Hill, near Avebury, Wilts, or Hambledon Hill, near Iwerne Courtney, Dorset. Neolithic burial mounds are common in the Cotswolds. The nearest, on private land near the end of Greenway Lane, is less than a mile north-east of Crickley. Similar Cotswold barrows open to the public may be seen at Hetty Pegler's Tump, Uley, or Belas Knap, Charlton Abbots.

Further Reading

Isobel Smith

Isobel Smith
Stuart Piggott

Helen O'Neil
and L. V. Grinsell

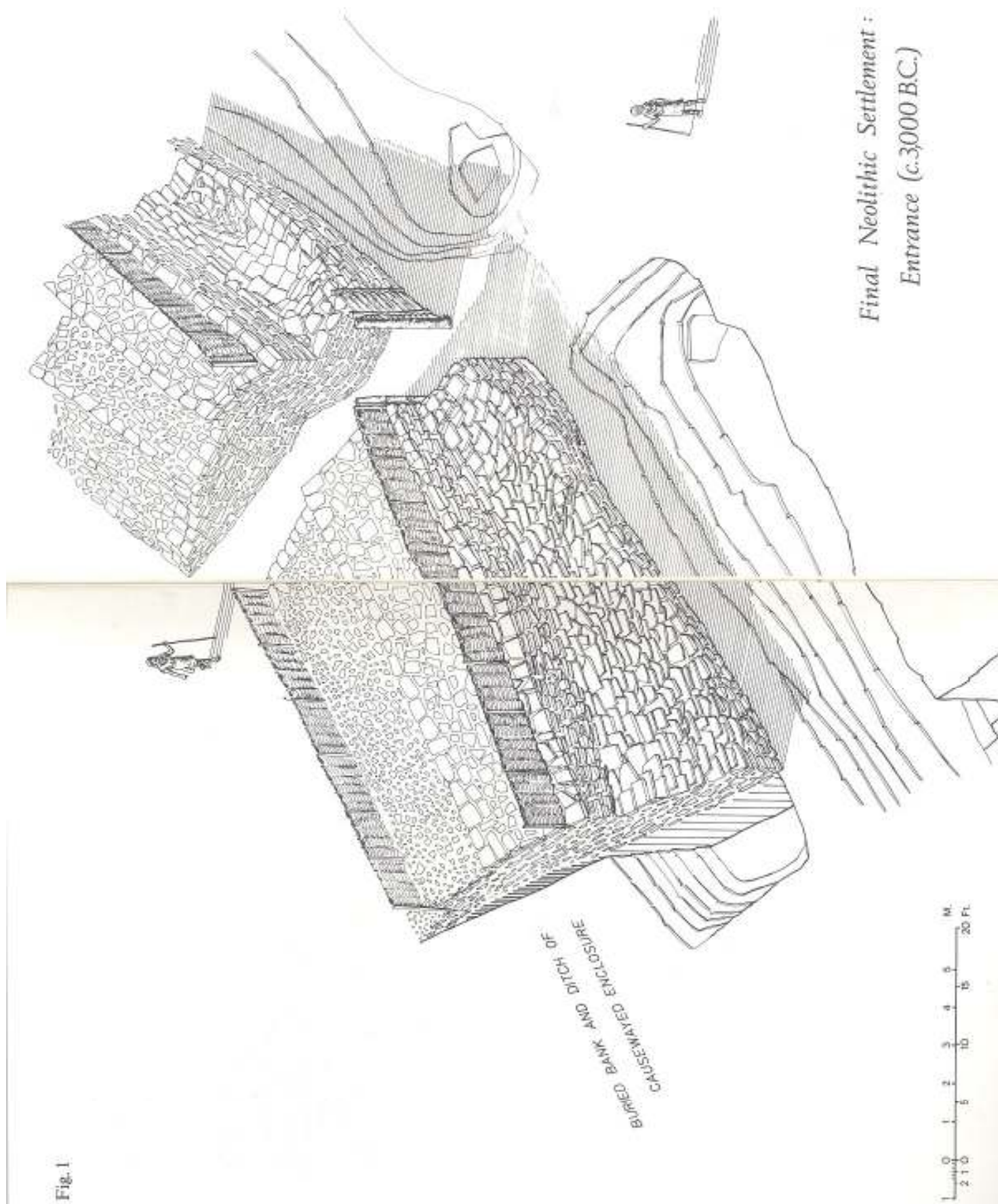
'The Neolithic' in *British Prehistory*, ed. C. Renfrew (1974)

Windmill Hill and Avebury (1965)

The Neolithic Cultures of the British Isles (1954)

'Gloucestershire Barrows', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* LXXIX, Part 1, 1960

Fig. 1



THE FIRST HILLFORT AT CRICKLEY

The first metals, copper and copper alloys, appeared in Britain about 2000 B.C., apparently associated with the immigrant users of 'Beakers', characteristically-shaped decorated vessels of fine pottery (fig. 4). Iron came into common use in Britain much later, during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., and the sophisticated bronze-smiths and founders of the Late Bronze Age were replaced as the providers of tools and weapons by blacksmiths.

After the abandonment of the Neolithic site Crickley seems to have lain deserted for over a thousand years. A few fragments of Beaker pottery have been recognised in the excavations, and flint arrowheads of the same period suggest that the hilltop was then being used for little more than hunting. The change came with the arrival of the hillfort builders.

Continental scholars have traced the growth of strongly fortified hill-settlements from 1200 B.C. onwards. In Britain the development came later, with C14 dates not earlier than the 11th or 10th centuries B.C., and most of the hillfort foundation-dates belong to a yet later period, to the three or four centuries after 700 B.C. The first fort at Crickley was built early in this latter period, perhaps in the 7th or 6th century. The new rampart and ditch (see fig. 5) enclosed an area of some nine acres, more than double that of the causewayed enclosure, and provided a substantial barrier with a rock-cut ditch 2m (6ft) deep, and a drystone wall built of the stone taken from it at least 3m (10ft) high. The entrance was a narrow timber-lined passage shut by two gates, and the defences were presumably capped by timber or wickerwork screens.

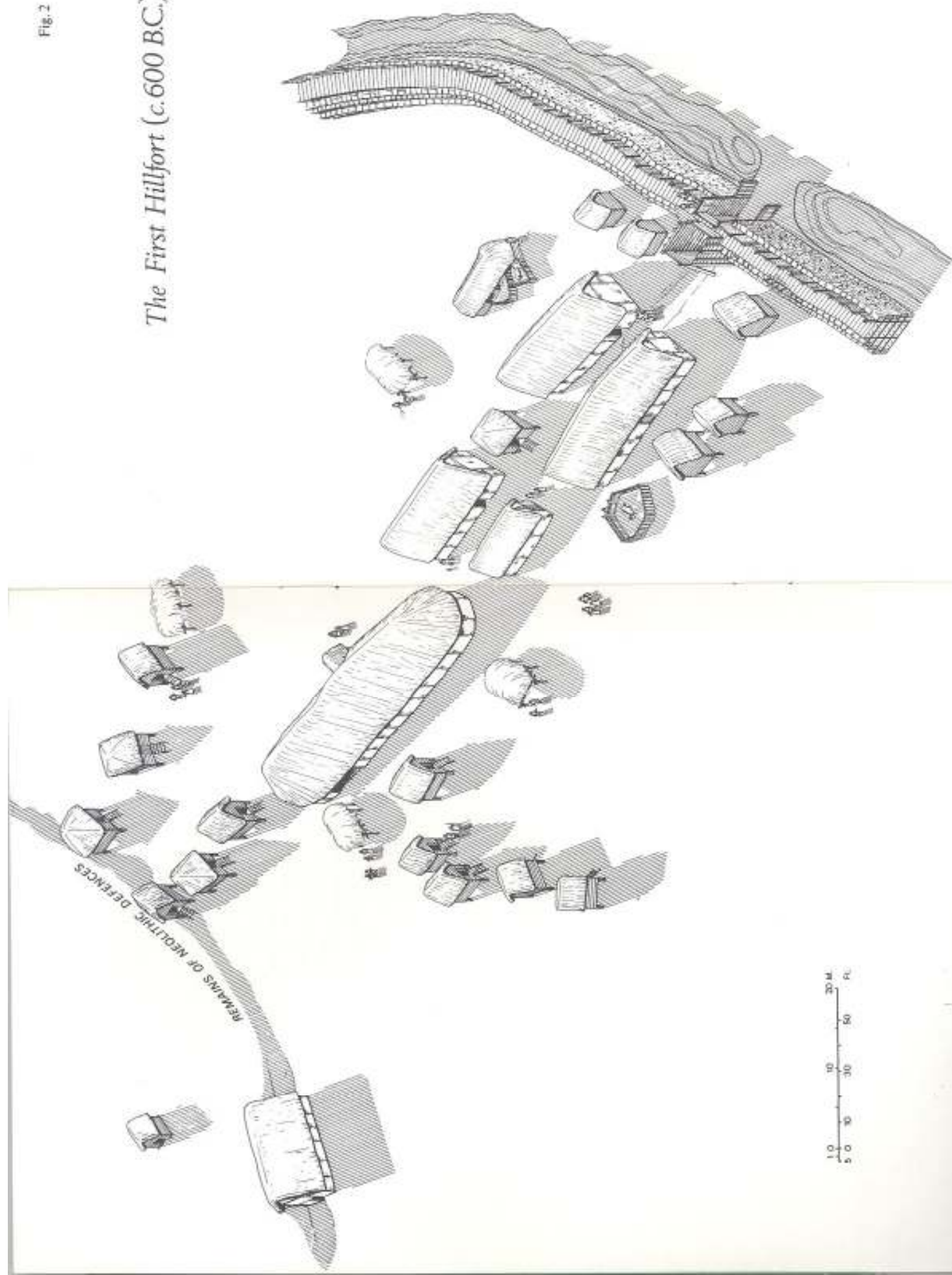
Behind the entrance a roadway ran between lines of buildings whose position is now marked only by the postholes in which their principal upright timbers were set. Beside the roadway the buildings were probably large rectangular barn-like houses, and two more houses of this sort lay in the area of the abandoned Neolithic enclosure - one, indeed, along the line of its ditch, as can be seen in the reconstruction drawing (fig. 2). Groups of small square huts, each supported on four posts, stood around the houses.

None contained hearths, and they were probably intended for the storage of crops. More irregular collections of postholes may have belonged to subsidiary buildings, such as drying racks, animal pens, hovels for farm implements, or roofed stack-stands. A variety of these structures is shown in the two reconstruction drawings of the hillfort periods, (figs. 2 and 3), but there is, of course, no certainty in any of the versions adopted.

The houses so far uncovered (in about one third of the fort's total area) could perhaps have accommodated from 50 to 200 people: there is no way of estimating the density of settlement in the unexcavated area. This community survived long enough to wear down the entrance roadway, but had gone, it seems, before the replacement of rotten timber in its houses became necessary: one generation, then, or two at the most. The end was clearly abrupt. The gates were burned, the walls slighted, and the houses destroyed by fire.

Fig. 2

The First Hillfort (c.600 B.C.)



THE SECOND HILLFORT

After the burning of the first fort the site was abandoned for several years at least, while silt layers and turf formed above the ruins. Rebuilding began piecemeal: the old walls were patched up and a new gate inserted into the damaged entrance. Subsequently this gate was massively rebuilt in a single operation and was now defended by a pair of stone bastions, approach being checked by a second gate in a large outwork. Behind this spectacular and formidable obstacle the settlement was replanned: a great round house, nearly 50 feet in diameter, stood directly beyond the inner gate; around it lay an irregular ring of smaller roundhouses; further away small square buildings in clusters were presumably used as granaries, and other groups of postholes, in pairs or similar arrangements, may be seen as the remains of ancillary buildings like those of the earlier settlement; (see fig. 3). A radiocarbon date from the new gateway suggests a date for the rebuilt fort not later than the late 6th or the early 5th century B.C.

The difference in building techniques is striking, and the new community used a fine decorated pottery quite distinct from that of the first hillfort. To regard the inhabitants as newcomers seems reasonable, but they will not have come from far away, for similar pottery-styles (and similar houses) were in fashion in contemporary sites in the mid and upper Thames basin.

The life of the second hillfort may well also have been short: the new cobbled road through the entrance was worn and patched, but there were no signs of repair or rebuilding in the postholes either of the houses or of the defences. Despite its massive rampart the fort was attacked and captured: the houses were burnt, a thick layer of charcoal covered the cobbled road, and the walls of the bastions were reddened by fire.

Other Sites to see

Of the many hillforts of the Gloucestershire Cotswolds only Leckhampton, near Cheltenham, has produced evidence of an occupation broadly contemporary with that at Crickley, ending in a similar destruction. Excavation has shown that the Leckhampton rampart belongs to a single period of building, with a few scraps of pottery resembling that of the second Crickley hillfort.

Nothing is yet known of the houses inside Leckhampton, but roundhouses are familiar from many sites in Britain. Small roundhouses (based on examples found at the later Iron Age sites of Conderton, near Bredon, Worcs., and Glastonbury, Somerset) may be seen reconstructed at the Avoncroft Museum, near Bromsgrove; a large roundhouse, modelled on the house excavated at Pimperne, Dorset, has recently been built at the experimental Iron Age farm on Little Butser Hill, near Petersfield, Hants.

Further Reading

D. Harding
B. Cunliffe
B. Cunliffe

Royal Commission
on Historical
Monuments

The Iron Age in Lowland Britain (1974)
Iron Age Communities in Britain (1974)
'The Iron Age' in *British Prehistory*, ed. C.
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*Ancient and Historical Monuments in the
County of Gloucester, Vol. I: Iron Age and
Romano-British Monuments in the Gloucester-
shire Cotswolds* (1976)

Fig. 3

The Second Hillfort (c. 500 B.C.)



LATER DEVELOPMENTS

After the destruction of Crickley's second hillfort, perhaps about 500 B.C., the site was again abandoned. A few pieces of metalwork found in the turf (Iron Age pins, a brooch, Roman sandal nails, and Anglo-Saxon dress ornaments) imply no more than transient visitors, and no permanent buildings have been recognised later than those of the last hillfort period. No signs of ploughing have been noticed and the hill was presumably used only for grazing. The burnt wooden buildings would soon have disappeared, but parts of the ramparts stood until the 3rd or 4th century A.D., in their final collapse burying a small pig which was apparently rooting in the rubbish of the ruined entrance passage.

Changes meanwhile occurred in the settlements of Gloucestershire. A new group of hillforts was built to the north, on Bredon Hill and the adjacent Cotswold slopes. No radiocarbon dates are available, but their pottery belongs to the 4th and 3rd century and later, and closely resembles the material from the forts of the Malverns and Herefordshire: the influences in the area seem to have shifted from east to west. A discovery of great significance has recently been made at Beckford, near Bredon, where rescue excavations, in advance of gravel workings, have exposed parts of a large lowland settlement, whose houses were set within a regular grid of rectangular boundary ditches. The arrangement resembles that at Dragonby, Lincs., and is the first clear occurrence of an 'eastern flat settlement' in the west, an area otherwise dominated by hillforts. The Beckford pottery is identical to that from the tiny fort at Conderton nearby, which can thus plausibly be seen as the citadel of the otherwise unfortified village. No open settlement is yet known which might have been associated with the Crickley Hill fort.

Farther south, the small hillfort at Painswick Beacon, with its multiple lines of banks and ditches, is of a type associated with the latest Iron Age, but no dates are available for the site. During the first century A.D. a new centre of settlement was forming at Bagendon, near Cirencester, a tribal capital 200 acres in extent within its banks, the

predecessor of the Roman town. An important family must have lived near Crickley at this period, for roadmaking between Crickley and Birdlip in 1879 revealed a small cemetery of the early 1st century A.D., whose rich grave goods are now displayed in Gloucester Museum. No contemporary settlement site has been uncovered, and Crickley Hill itself remained deserted until the foundation in the 2nd century A.D. of the small Roman farm whose ranch boundaries may be traced within the wood to the east of the hillfort.

Further Reading

- | | |
|--|---|
| E. M. Clifford | <i>Bagendon</i> (1961) |
| C. Green | 'The Birdlip Early Iron Age Burials', <i>Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society</i> xv (1949) |
| W. Britnell | 'Beckford', <i>Current Archaeology</i> 45 (1974) |
| An excellent gazeteer and general guide is | |
| J. Dyer | <i>Southern England: an archaeological guide</i> (1973) |

GEOLOGY

The Cotswold Hills are part of a ridge of Middle Jurassic rocks, mainly limestones, that runs diagonally across England from Dorset to N. Yorkshire. The south-easterly tilt of the limestone strata produces a gentle slope towards Oxford and a steep scarp towards the Vale of Gloucester, from which project a number of spurs or headlands. Crickley Hill, pointing diagonally from the scarp edge, towards the west, is one of these; (see fig. 5). Its sides have been steepened, and its promontory-like shape accentuated, by the quarrying, over centuries, of the oolitic limestone of which it is formed. This rock, so named because it is composed of spherical grains of calcium carbonate resembling fish roe (Greek *ōion*: an egg; *lithos*: a stone), can produce excellent building stone, formerly transported to areas outside the Cotswolds for use in prestigious buildings. Crickley's stone, however, is of poorer quality, and its use has been local: for the surviving prehistoric structures on the site, and recently for houses, field walls, and, after burning it, to improve the clays of the lowlands; the hill's most recently worked quarry closed only in 1963. Archaeologically, the effect of the quarrying has been most drastic on the south side, now cliff-like in profile, where part of the hillfort rampart and interior have been removed; their original extent can thus no longer be determined.

Although massive below, as may be seen in the recent quarry, the oolite near the surface on the hilltop has been horizontally laminated by exposure. In undisturbed areas, once the topsoil has been removed, the rock looks like great expanses of crazy paving, in which postholes and other man-made features are clearly visible. Many places, however, have been disturbed, not only by rabbit holes and tree roots, but also by geological phenomena. Along the axis of the promontory run large fissures of great depth. Originally vertical joints in the limestone, these have been enlarged to their present surface width of up to 20 feet by seeping water, which dissolves calcium carbonate, and by frost, and they are packed with the tiny fragments of the once solid rock thus destroyed. Known to quarrymen as "gulls", these fissures can be archaeologically confusing: not only do they sometimes superficially resemble back-filled ditches, but real features occurring in them can be less well-defined than on the flat-bedded limestone;

in them also, because of their softer matrix, are found most of the rabbit holes. In at least one instance the first Neolithic builders too took advantage of their softness and aligned a stretch of their causewayed ditch along a gull. On excavation the ditch was found to have no bottom, but instead a deep fissure, formed along the existing line of weakness only after the ditch was at least partially refilled.

In addition to the main axial fissures other cracks run along and parallel to the sides of the hill. These demonstrate clearly the forces of erosion at work, by infinitesimal stages detaching blocks of rock from the slope, so that, over the millennia, the entire scarp recedes, leaving occasional residual masses of harder rock, such as Robins Wood Hill and Churchdown Hill, both of which can be seen from Crickley.

Further Reading

British Regional
Geology
W. Dreghorn

Bristol and Gloucester District, H.M.S.O. (1948)

*Geology Explained in the Severn Vale and
Cotswolds* (1967)

THE EXCAVATION

Digging at Crickley began in the summer of 1969 and has continued for five or six weeks during July and August in each subsequent year. The first area to be investigated was the hillfort entrance, which had been damaged by an earthmoving machine in 1967, and was clearly vulnerable to further accidents. In 1971 the inner bank was sampled, and found, somewhat unexpectedly, to be of Neolithic date and not (as had previously been thought) part of an earlier Iron Age hillfort. Between 1972 and 1974 the interior of the hillfort was examined, in a series of campaigns which exposed most of those hillfort buildings which we have so far discovered. More recently we have concentrated our attention on the Neolithic banks and ditches in the centre of the hilltop. The former owner of the land, Tom Morris, has now with great generosity given it to the County Council, and it has been designated a Country Park.

The programme was begun with the sponsorship of the Gloucestershire College of Art and Design, and it has continued with the generous support of the College, Gloucestershire County Council, the Macfarlane Walker Trust, the Dulverton Trust, and many individuals and institutions, to all of whom we are most grateful.

Throughout, the work has been voluntary, and up to 1977 well over 1000 volunteers from all over the world have freely given their time and energies, under the expert direction, over the years, of 22 supervisors. In this period an area of $2\frac{3}{4}$ acres has been stripped by hand, mostly in a grid of squares of 10 metre sides.

Part of our purpose is to train diggers in the techniques of excavation, and we are able each year to accept a number of volunteers without archaeological experience; any who wish to join us should write to Philip Dixon at the address given on p. 25. Since ours is a research excavation, we are wholly dependent on donations to cover the running costs of the work, and information on the means of making them will be found on the same page. We intend to continue digging from mid-July to late August each year (excluding Thursdays), and we are very happy to see visitors, and, work permitting, to show them around the site.

STUDYING GLOUCESTERSHIRE PREHISTORY

All but a minute fraction of man's past is prehistoric, and we can learn of it only through the archaeologist's study of its material remains. These are irreplaceable; they are humanity's only long-term archive. Gloucestershire is particularly rich in them. Within its modern boundaries there are at least 65 long barrows, 300 round barrows, and 25 hillforts; see the chronological chart (fig 4). Countless other sites of prehistoric occupation, industry or religion in the county are now indicated only by a scatter of flint or pottery or by differences in the vegetation seen from the air. There is no reason to doubt that there are many sites in Gloucestershire which could tell us as much as Crickley Hill, each in its own way. Our understanding of man's past depends on our detailed knowledge of them, and comparable monuments elsewhere. Unfortunately many are liable to destruction by such processes as building, roadmaking, quarrying and ploughing, which have been damaging them in the last decades faster than archaeology can investigate them.

Some sites are scheduled, as Crickley Hill is, by the Ancient Monuments Directorate of the Department of the Environment under the terms of the Ancient Monuments Acts, 1913 - 1953. These afford them some protection, by no means complete. The majority have no legal protection at all, and are liable to be disturbed or destroyed at need. When this is done, it is sometimes possible to mount an excavation in advance to recover at least some information about the site. But many are destroyed unrecognised, or recognised only in the act of destruction.

Excavation is intended to relate a sequence of buried deposits to the objects found in them, and to record, interpret and publish the relationships. The arbitrary removal of objects from the sequence destroys the association of object with deposit which gives both most

of their scientific value. It is for this reason that the extraction of objects from the ground in the manner, for example, of treasure-hunting with a metal detector is archaeologically unacceptable.

Those who wish to play a part in the study of their local archaeology may do so in a number of ways; for example, by helping to compile and maintain a register of sites of archaeological importance; by agreeing to watch for any disturbance of known sites within a certain area; and by working on properly-directed excavations. Membership of an archaeological society makes participation in these and other helpful activities easier and more effective, and is itself useful to archaeology in that the member's subscription supports publication. The county society, the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, has an archaeological library in Gloucester, and publishes its *Transactions* annually. The Gloucester and District Archaeological Research Group publishes its own periodical, *Glevensis*, maintains a most important register of sites, undertakes surveys and rescue excavations, and has an annual programme of archaeological lectures and visits. The Council for British Archaeology co-ordinates activity at a national level, publishing for example a calendar of the excavations which will accept volunteer help. The Committee for Rescue Archaeology in Avon, Gloucestershire and Somerset administers most of the funds allocated by the Department of the Environment for the rescue archaeology of the region, and publishes regional surveys and excavation reports. The Extra-Mural Department of the University of Bristol, and the Workers' Educational Association, organise evening courses in archaeology throughout the county.

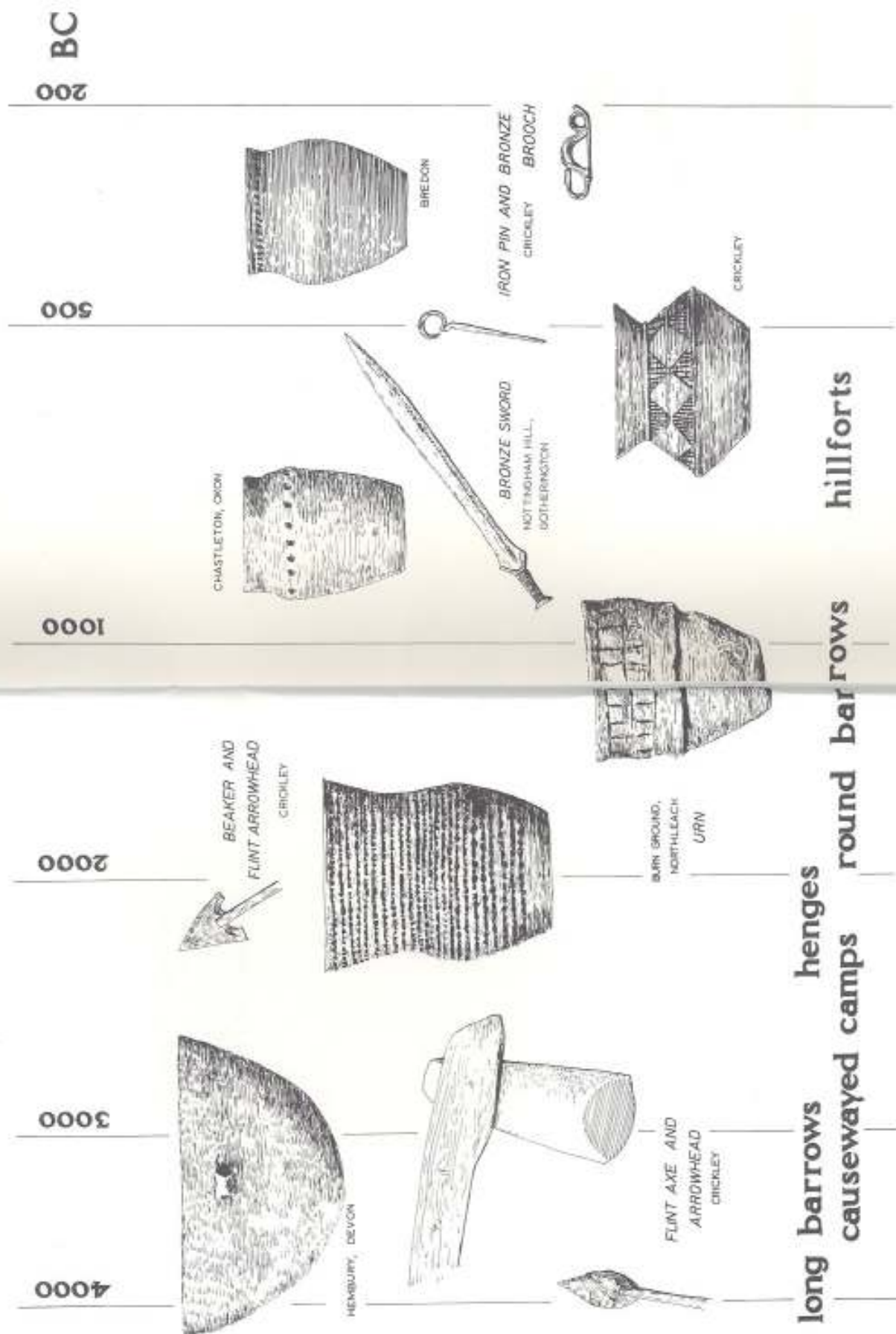
The addresses of all these bodies may be got from the county's libraries and museums. The latter, particularly those of Gloucester, Cheltenham and Stroud, have extensive prehistoric collections, and even the smallest finds which may be of archaeological interest should be reported to one of them.

Visitors to sites should always observe the Countryside Code. In particular, they should keep to footpaths, keep their dogs on a leash, leave no gates open, leave no litter, and on no account disturb the ground. Where the site is on private land, the owner's permission to visit should be obtained.

Some suggestions for further reading have already been made. For those who wish to follow the progress of research, the journals *Antiquity* and *Current Archaeology* regularly publish articles of prehistoric interest; the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* are devoted to them.

Prehistoric flint, pottery and bronze objects with contemporary structures

Fig. 4



THE CRICKLEY HILL TRUST

The Crickley Hill Trust is a charitable Trust formed in 1976 with the object of promoting and assisting the excavation and investigation of the Crickley Hill fort and of other sites of archaeological or historic interest in Gloucestershire, and of instructing students and others in field archaeology and of facilitating the exhibition to the public of objects of archaeological interest.

The Trust has a licence from the Gloucestershire County Council to explore the parts of Crickley Hill which are owned by the Council, and part of Ullenwood Camp is leased from the Council to accommodate volunteers during excavation.

In due course the Trust hopes to provide, possibly in collaboration with the County Council, for the rebuilding of structures of archaeological interest associated with the hill fort.

The present members of the Trust are:—

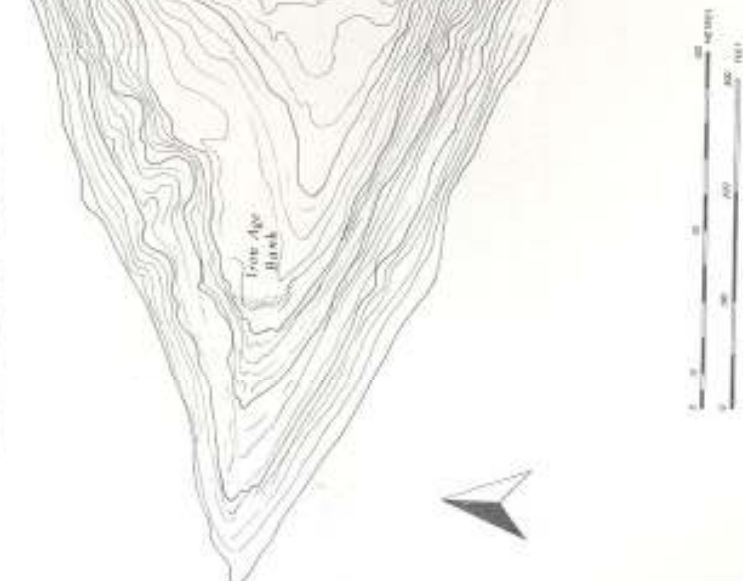
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Richard F. Walker, OBE
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P.M. Robins, Esq., Glos.C.C. Representative

Hon. Secretary and Treasurer:—

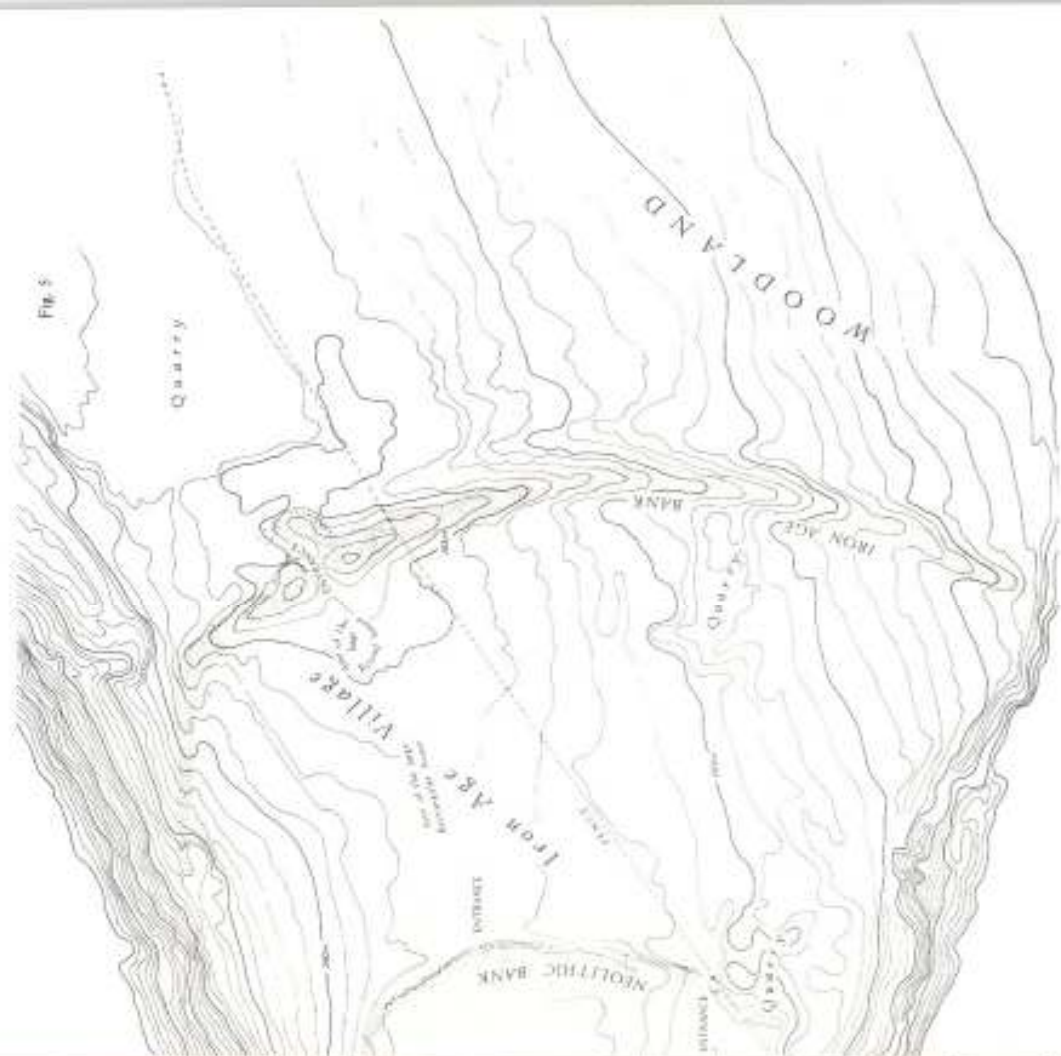
R.E. Burke
Ermine House
Hucclecote
Gloucester
Telephone: Gloucester 66216

(Registered Charity No. 271675)

CRICKLEY HILL



Above: Location of the settlement areas



Back Cover: The entrance to the second hillfort under excavation 1970

